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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 002498

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWBG](#) [PBTS](#) [IS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [JO](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: PA ANGRY THAT HAJJ PILGRIMS ARE ALLOWED TO USE
RAFAH CROSSING

REF: JERUSALEM 2453

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. PA officials--including President Abbas and PM Fayyad--have strongly condemned Egypt and Saudi Arabia for their roles in facilitating the movement of Hajj pilgrims through Rafah Crossing, in coordination with Hamas. President Abbas called the Egyptian and Saudi action "shameful" in a meeting with the Consul General on December 3. Deputy Waqf/Religious Affairs Minister Salah Zuhaykah told PolOff in conversations December 3-4 that the PA was "surprised and disappointed" that the Egyptian and Saudi governments had "colluded with Hamas." PA Waqf Minister Jamal al-Bawatna told PolOff on December 4 that the exit of Gaza pilgrims through Rafah undermines the PA's governing authority and strengthens the perception that Hamas is a legitimate parallel government in Gaza rather than a rebellious faction. He complained that Saudi authorities are considering Hamas' "PA Waqf Minister" and his deputy as the Palestinian Hajj delegation heads, which he said is "unacceptable." A link to photos of pilgrims' movement into Gaza at para. 6. End summary.

1,200 Hajj Pilgrims Cross Through Rafah;
PA "Surprised and Disappointed"

¶2. (C) Deputy Waqf/Religious Affairs Minister Salah Zuhaykah told PolOff late December 3 that the PA was "surprised and disappointed" that the Egyptian and Saudi governments had "colluded with Hamas" to allow Hajj pilgrims to use Rafah Crossing, rather than the PA-sponsored system agreed to by the GoI. He said opening Rafah is a "slap to the face" of at least 500 pilgrims in Gaza who registered through the PA and whose ability to travel to the Hajj is uncertain, because they do not yet have Saudi visas.

¶3. (C) Zuhaykah said the Waqf Ministry believes the Saudi government was complicit in the arrangement. The GOE accepted passports for Gazan pilgrims from Hamas-controlled Waqf offices, he said, and the Saudi Embassy in Cairo issued visas for all 2,200 pilgrims who registered through Hamas-controlled offices. He said the Qatari government also helped by funding a private jet to transport some Gaza pilgrims from al-Arish Airport in the Sinai to the Hijaz.

PA Waqf Minister: Arab Dealings with
Hamas Undermines PA Governing Authority

¶4. (C) PA Waqf Minister Jamal al-Bawatna told PolOff on December 4 that the Hamas-brokered exit of Gaza pilgrims through Rafah undermines the PA's governing authority and strengthens the perception that Hamas is a legitimate

parallel government in Gaza rather than a rebellious faction.

Zuhaykah said the PA and Saudi MFA had agreed that only the PA would register pilgrims for visa applications and would move all pilgrims, from both the West Bank and Gaza, to Jordan via Allenby Bridge (reported reftel). Zuhaykah said the Saudi MFA is holding up Hajj visa applications the PA submitted for both Gaza and West Bank pilgrims. If not issued, Zuhaykah said the PA will face a major backlash for those unable to attend the Hajj, as well as lose large sums of money it paid in advance for pilgrims housing and transportation.

15. (C) Minister al-Bawatna also complained that Saudi authorities are considering Hamas' purported "PA Waqf Minister" Yusif al-Mansi and his deputy (sacked by the PA) Salah al-Ruqub as the Palestinian Hajj delegation heads. Al-Bawatna said this is unacceptable, as it creates the impression that the Saudis recognize Hamas as a parallel Palestinian government.

Photos of Pilgrims Movement into Egypt

16. (C) Photos of the crossing, showing pilgrims escorted by Hamas security forces and Egyptian border police, were supplied by EU-BAM and are posted at:
http://www.intelink.gov/communities/state/pal_econ.

Comment

17. (C) Coordination with Hamas-controlled institutions in Gaza undermines the PA as the sole Palestinian governing authority and complicates PA moves to assert control over

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religious and social institutions. Arab cooperation with Hamas authorities reinforces political division and supports Hamas propaganda campaigns. If Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank who registered with the PA cannot make the Hajj, but those who registered with Hamas, can, there will be anger at the PA for failing to deliver on an important public service.

WALLES